

ASCENSION DAY 2021 – SR DEBORAH FRANCIS

When I read in the beginning of Acts about the reaction of the Apostles to Jesus being carried out of their sight, I think of them as tourists in Times Square. You know – bunched together in the middle of the sidewalk, looking up. Finally, someone says “Why are you looking up? The city is all around you.”

The Apostles still have their preconceptions about Jesus’ mission. They ask if he will restore Israel’s kingdom now. Jesus says God is in charge of that. It’s not for them to know. He tells them to wait in Jerusalem to receive power from the Holy Spirit and then they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world. Had the Apostles remained looking into the heavens to catch a last view of Jesus, they would have been living in the past.

It is clear that Jesus did not view the coming Kingdom as a political entity based on power. According to William Barclay, if we look carefully at the Lord’s Prayer it will give us a clue. “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom is a society on earth where God’s will is to be done as in heaven. It is based on love not power. It is completely different than what the Apostles had in mind.

One thing should be noted about Jesus’ return to his former glory. He is going to his Father taking his physical body with him. To be sure it is a rather different body – he can appear and disappear, eat fish, appear in a room where the doors are locked and reveal the scars of the crucifixion. Jesus incorporated his humanity into the Godhead. This is part of his mission to reconcile all of creation to God. So even if they don’t see Jesus physically, he will always be with them. No wonder the Apostles left rejoicing as they returned to Jerusalem.

The Ascension was both an ending and a beginning. It was the ending of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. It was decisive – the end of physical reassurances about Jesus’ resurrection. Again from Barclay, “The days when their faith was in a flesh and blood Jesus and flesh and blood presence were over. Now they were linked to someone who was forever independent of time and space.”

The Ascension marks the beginning of something new. The Apostles had witness that Jesus freed from the confines of his physical limitations, would always be

available to them. They will become witnesses to his resurrection throughout the known world.

But how would this happen? These were the same people who, not very long ago, were hiding behind closed doors. Clearly something had to transform them.

Before the cloud took him out of sight, Jesus had done several things:

- He had opened their minds to understand the scriptures concerning himself.
- He tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. They are not to rush out and attempt to witness based on their own strength. They are to stay put. When this happens they will receive power to become his witnesses.
- Finally, He lifts up his hands and blesses them before he departs.

Have you ever felt that however much you wanted to be in Jesus' presence, you can't find him? Does an uncertain future make you anxious? Have you felt sure that you knew what God was up to only to realize you were wrong?

Congratulations – you know how the Apostles felt.

The Apostle Paul says in one of his letters that “the just shall live by faith.” Not an easy task. Sometimes it seems impossible. How do we walk by faith and not by sight when nothing is clear to us?

The first thing we can do is to be open to the movements of the Holy Spirit around us and with us. To do this we will need to put aside our preconceptions about how Jesus speaks to us. We must release our plans to God. God is not obliged to do what we want or do it according to our timetable. The second thing we can do is to wait on God where we are. This also is not easy (at least not for me.) I usually want God's presence and purpose to be predictable and comfortable.

If God wants me to change, He will make me uncomfortable with myself, restless and unsure. I need to wait in my discomfort and my restlessness for discernment. I can immerse myself in the scriptures. They will remind me of the many ways God has made himself known in the past. They can remind me of God's love for me. I can be more present in prayer both private and corporate. It is too easy for

me to be distracted and just go through the motions. Often what I need is to just pay attention.

We are in the same position as the Apostles after the Ascension. I hope we can also go into our future rejoicing.